

St. Lawrence Wetland and Grassland Management District

Facts about Waterfowl Production Areas and Conservation Easements

Bill Zinni / USFWS

Waterfowl Production Areas



WPAs are small, federally owned public lands purchased by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that are dedicated to providing valuable breeding

and migration habitat for ducks and other birds. The Service is proposing to create WPAs within the focus area of Jefferson County, NY following town government approval. WPAs would involve 20 percent (1,600 acres) or less of the focus area.

Research shows that agricultural grasslands interspersed with abundant freshwater wetlands and tributaries creates habitat conditions that are critical to waterfowl and other migratory birds. Some ducks build their nests in dry grassy areas rather than in marshes, so it is important that WPAs include both grassy areas and wetlands. The more acres of grass available for hiding a nest, the more likely it is that the eggs in a duck nest will hatch rather than be destroyed by predators.

WPAs are for people too!

Waterfowl production areas are open to the public for outdoor recreation.

Hunting, hiking, birdwatching, and wildlife photography are some of the most popular uses.



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WPAs provide ideal habitat for breeding mallards and other migratory birds.

Why Jefferson County?

The land and water features in Jefferson County provide an ideal combination of wetland and grassland habitats. Waterfowl and species like bobolinks, short-eared owls, and upland sandpipers, rare and declining elsewhere in the northeastern United States, thrive in Jefferson County, and the rest of the St. Lawrence Valley.

The Refuge Revenue Sharing Act

Since portions of WPAs are owned in fee title by the Service, those parcels are exempt from taxation like other federally owned lands. However, the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act offsets tax losses by annually paying counties or other local units of government an amount that often equals or exceeds the value in taxes that would have been collected if the property were in private ownership.

The "Duck Stamp Act"



The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, or the "Duck Stamp Act," requires each

waterfowl hunter 16 years of age or older to possess a valid federal hunting stamp. In 1958, Congress amended the Duck Stamp Act to authorize the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to use money from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps to buy small wetland areas to preserve waterfowl habitat. Every dollar spent purchasing a Federal Duck Stamp goes directly toward acquiring waterfowl habitat, including waterfowl production areas. Nearly 95 percent of WPAs are located in the prairie wetlands or "potholes" of the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Montana.

Clockwise from top: view of a St. Lawrence Valley wetland, a federal duck stamp, a waterfowl hunter, and a WPA boundary sign.

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits certain land uses like road construction to protect the land's habitat values. Other activities, however, such as farming, forestry, hunting, and fishing could continue when they are consistent with conservation goals. Unlike WPAs, conservation easements stay in private ownership.

Conservation easements are

- permanent agreements between the Service and all present and future landowners;
- voluntary, and pertain to wetlands of value to waterfowl, and grasslands that are adjacent to wetlands.

Conservation easements do not

- open land to public use;
- take land out of private ownership;
- place signs on your property;
- affect hunting, fishing and trapping rights;
- include drained wetlands, unless the ditches are filled and the wetlands are restored;
- remove land from local tax bases, and thus do not qualify for refuge revenue sharing payments.

Six Steps to Get an Easement

1 Contact the person listed on this brochure to schedule a site inspection of your property.

2 The Service obtains title evidence at no cost to you and checks the title to determine that all owners of record have signed the easement.

3 Service attorneys review the case and furnish an opinion of title. If the opinion points out any title defects, the Service will assist you in correcting them.

4 The Service accepts the easement and sends you a letter by certified mail with a copy of the easement.

5 The county courthouse records the easement.

6 You receive a single lump-sum check from the U.S. Treasury for the full amount specified in the easement.

Illustration by Laury Zicari, USFWS



Conservation easements allow the Service to work with voluntary partners or landowners to protect valuable land that remains in private ownership.

Wetland easements

With wetland easements, landowners agree not to drain, fill, level, or burn their wetlands. When these wetlands dry up naturally, they can be farmed, grazed, or hayed. Wetlands covered by an easement are mapped and a copy of the easement and maps is sent to the landowner.

Grassland easements

Grassland easements provide permanent grassland cover around wetlands to meet the needs of upland nesting waterfowl and other wildlife. The Service purchases specific property rights, including the right to plow or destroy the grassland. Grazing, haying, mowing and grass-seed harvest are restricted or must take place after July 15 when birds are finished nesting. Some of these agricultural practices can be allowed depending on the condition of the land and the desire of the landowners.

Grassland species, like this bobolink, depend on pastures, hayfields, and agricultural grasslands maintained by farmers and other landowners. Although these habitats are in decline throughout much of the northeastern United States, the St. Lawrence Valley boasts successful broods and stable populations.

For further information

Thomas M. Jasikoff, Project Leader
St. Lawrence Wetland and Grassland
Management District
1490 Boland Road
Richville, NY 13681
Phone: 315/568 5987 x 230 or 287 9093
Fax: 315/568 8835 or 287 9086
TDD: 800/877 8339
E-mail: tom_jasikoff@fws.gov
Brochure: http://library.fws.gov/Refuges/St_Lawrence.pdf

Federal Relay Service for the deaf and hard-of-hearing: 1 800/877 8339

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>
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